Kingdom and Creation from Jesus to Paul: Does the New Testament Give Us an Ecological Mandate?

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This article is an attempt, first, to offer a sketch of Jesus' kingdom teaching, as it relates particularly to creation; then more briefly to go on to look at Paul and see how his teaching compares.[1] The question behind the paper: can those of us who look to the New Testament as foundational for our Christian faith derive from it any sort of ecological mandate? As well as offering some possible answers to that question, the article will hopefully also cast some light on the notoriously difficult question of how Jesus' teaching and Paul's relate.

(1) Jesus' teaching on kingdom and creation

It may appear foolhardy to offer a summary of Jesus' teaching on kingdom and creation given all the scholarly doubts and debates about the historical Jesus. In face of those doubts, it may be helpful to explain at the outset (a) that my assumption in this article is that it is possible to glean reliable historical information about Jesus from the gospels; (b) that the summary which I will offer is based largely on the well-attested synoptic tradition, which is widely recognized by scholars as authentic; but (c) that, even if the charitable historical assumption is wrong, the discussion will still not be valueless, though the article's title could perhaps be changed to 'Kingdom and creation: the gospels and Paul'!

(i) Eschatological Fulfilment

Mark summarizes Jesus' kingdom message thus: 'The time (kairos) is filled up; the kingdom of God has come near' (1.15). In these words we are immediately confronted with something that comes out loud and clear in all the gospels: namely that the coming of the kingdom, as proclaimed by Jesus, is the arrival of something that has been awaited, or, to be more precise, that it is the fulfilment of Old Testament promise and expectation. The 'Q' saying of Matt 13.16,17/Luke 10.23,24 is addressed to the disciples: 'Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it'. The same thought is expressed in the message about Jesus' ministry sent to John the Baptist in the Q saying of Matt 11.4,5/Luke 7.22, where the words about the blind receiving their sight, etc., are deliberate echoes of Isaiah 35.5-6, 61.1; also in the programmatic Lukan description of Jesus' ministry in Luke 4.16-30 ('Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing...'), and in the important Matthean saying 'I have not come to abolish them (the law and the prophets), but to fulfil them' (5.17, cf Luke 24.44).

The gospel testimony is unanimous that Jesus announced the coming to fulfilment of OT promises. Just as at Qumran the sectarians were conscious of living in the last days of fulfilment, so (despite some scholarly doubts) Jesus and his followers believed that the promised day of the Lord, the eschatological rule of God, was coming in their experience. (I take it that Jesus believed the Kingdom to have been inaugurated in his lifetime, and that he expected it to be consummated 'at the end of the age'; but it would not drastically affect the argument if he believed it to be imminent but already being anticipated.)

The importance of this conclusion for the question of kingdom and creation is that the OT eschatological hope includes hope for the restoration of creation. For example, in Zechariah 14, which looks forward to the day when 'the Lord will be king over all the earth', i.e. to the kingdom of God, we read also of the abolition of cold and frost (good news in a poor peasant country), of continuous daylight, of living waters that never dry up (vv. 6-9). Other passages that speak in terms of ecological redemption are more familiar, for example Isaiah 11.6-9 with its promise of the wolf dwelling with the lamb, etc., or 35.1,2: 'The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing'. Such passages, whether intended by the prophets literally or poetically, are part of the Old Testament hope that lies behind Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom. Whether he picked up this aspect of the OT hope or not we will need to consider; but even at this point we may note that Isaiah 35 is quoted by Jesus in the Q tradition we have already mentioned (Matt 11.5ff).

(ii) Defeat of cosmic evil

A prominent feature of Jesus' ministry, especially associated with the kingdom in the Q tradition, was his exorcizing of demons. Culturally the idea of demon-possession and hence of exorcism may be strange to us today, but needless to say the idea is a very familiar one in many cultures, and it was so in first century Palestine. Jesus was not the only exorcist, as the gospels themselves attest, but he does appear to have been an exorcist of remarkable power, such that his opponents explained his power as deriving from Beelzebul, the prince of demons. The gospels describe various startling exorcisms, and the link is made specifically with the kingdom in the saying of Matt 12.28/Luke 11.20: 'If I by the Spirit (or finger) of God cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you'. Even without that text, we might have inferred that his exorcizing and his proclamation of the kingdom go together: the rule of God naturally is associated with the defeat of Satan. Satan is understood in various of the NT traditions as having - in a real sense - hijacked the world, and usurped God's position; thus in the Q temptation tradition it is Satan who offers Jesus authority over the kingdoms of the world, and in the John tradition he is called 'the ruler of this world' (12.31). John doesn't mention Jesus' exorcisms of demon-possessed people, but he does - strikingly - see the cross as the decisive exorcism of Satan ('Now shall the ruler of this world be cast out'). The synoptics see this casting out of Satan as going on during the ministry, not only in Jesus' ministry, but also in that of the disciples when sent out on mission; Jesus' comment in Luke 10.18 is 'I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven'.

This exorcizing ministry could be seen as a religious or 'spiritual' ministry without very much bearing on the question of creation. And yet the exorcizing of demons is in a real sense a restoration of created order, both on an individual level - for example, the terribly afflicted Legion in Mark 5 is found sitting, clothed and in his right mind - and on a cosmic level. The kingdoms of the world, which have been hijacked by evil, are being brought back under the rule and kingship of God. Jesus' contemporaries, to judge from the gospels, were disappointed at his failure to evict the Romans and their oppressive agents from Palestine; Jesus, however, appears to have had a bigger vision: Satan, not Caesar, is the storng man who is being bound.

That is not to say that Jesus' ministry had no social or (in some sense) political ingredient.[2] On the contrary, his eschatological mission was in a real sense the restoration of God's people (as promised in Scripture), and his attitude to the outcasts of society, including Samaritans, was part of his eschatological healing mission to the world: the old divisions and hatreds and prejudices and inequalities are overcome where the kingdom is present. It is not too much to say that the coming of the kingdom is the restoration of creation under its creator, and the exorcizing ministry, which Jesus exercized and (significantly from our point of view) committed to his followers has such a cosmic dimension.

(iii) Ministry of healing

What we have already said leads us on directly to the healing ministry of Jesus and to his miracles. Again we may have modern questions about the healing narratives of the gospels, but there is no good reason for doubting that Jesus was, and was known as, a charismatic wonder-worker (to use the scholarly jargon). The gospels are unanimous and emphatic in portraying Jesus thus, and later Jewish tradition recognized Jesus' magical powers, as they saw them.

Jesus' healings in the gospels are seen in the context of Old Testament fulfilment (point (i) above) and in the context of his struggle with Satan (point (ii) above). For his healings as fulfilment, we need only to refer back again to the message sent to John the Baptist (Matt 11.4-6) and to the Nazareth manifesto of Luke 4; for the connection with the war against Satan, the one text that is explicit is Luke 13.16, which speaks of the woman with the bent back as one 'whom Satan bound for eighteen years', but it is implicit in the way that proclamation of the kingdom is linked with exorcism and healing in the various versions of Jesus' mission discourse (E.g. Matt 10.7ff etc).

Jesus' healing ministry is - obviously - an engagement on his part with the physical aspect of life; it is a restoration not of spiritual health (centrally important though that is to Jesus' mission), but of physical health. It is the making good again of the created order.

It is possible to include at this point mention of the nature miracles, difficult though these are to many modern readers. Their significance too may be seen, at least partially, in terms of the redemption of creation - with the hungry being fed and the storms being stilled.

But reverting to the question of healing, the mission discourse makes it clear that ministry to the physical well-being of people is part of the coming of the kingdom and part of the responsibility of Jesus' followers. To that extent at least we may see in the gospel narratives of Jesus a mandate for the church to be concerned not just for things spiritual, but for creation in general.

(iv) A creation ethic?

I have argued on the basis of OT prophecy and the NT portrayal of Jesus' kingdom ministry that the restoration of creation is an important theme in Jesus' ministry. But this interpretation may seem to be more an inference than something explicitly supported in the gospel texts.

However, there is one important text which gives explicit support to the view suggesed, namely the text about divorce in Mark 10.1-12/Matt 19.1-12. There are strong reasons for believing this text to be authentic Jesus-tradition, not least because of the echoes of it in I Corinthans 7 (the echoes are moré extensive than often recognized),[3] but also because its uncompromising teaching concerning the ideals of the kingdom of God fits in with Jesus' teaching elsewhere, notably in the Sermon on the Mount.

The importance of the text from our point of view today is that Jesus, when justifying his prohibition of divorce in reply to a question about the Deuteronomic legislation on divorce, explains that it was a concession for the hardness of the human heart. 'But', he says, 'from the beginning of creation he created them male and female. Therefore a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' Jesus here justifies his absolute probibition of divorce - I assume that Jesus' prohibition was absolute, as Mark suggests - in terms of God's creative purpose. The standards of the kingdom of God are 'Your will be done on earth as in heaven', in other words 'Be perfect, as your heavenly

Father is perfect'. They are thus the standards of creation, which God saw was good, not the compromised standards represented by the law of Moses on a subject like divorce.

I take this to be the logic also of Jesus' prohibition of oaths (Matt 5.33-37), another passage with a good claim to authenticity, being echoed by James and (indirectly) by Paul (Jas 5.12, II Cor 1.17). According to Matthew Jesus says 'Let your word be yes, yes, no, no; more than these is *ek ponerou*. We might paraphrase 'more than these represents a compromise with evil'. You only have to use an oath where there is distrust or dishonesty. The kingdom of God represents the end of evil and compromise, the return to God's intended perfection for creation.

Jesus' teaching about cleanness and uncleanness may also be mentioned under this heading. The passage concerned, Mark 7.1-23/Matt 15.1-20, is similar to that about divorce, in that Jesus adopts a radical line quite distinct from 'the tradition of the elders'. In this case there is no explicit appeal to creation-principles over against later tradition; but the statement of Jesus that 'It is not what enters the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth...' is a remarkable one to come from a Jew trained in Old Testament food laws. It could simply be a rhetorical way of speaking about the priority of the 'moral' law (e.g. the commandment to love one's parents) over against the 'ceremonial' law; it could simply be an emphasis on the inward over against the outward. But, although there is plenty of evidence of Jesus' concern for the moral and the inward, the wording at the very least lays itself open to a more radical interpretation. The Markan interpretation was that Jesus 'thus cleansed all foods' (Mark 7.20). Paul, quite possibly with the same text in mind, understood Jesus similarly, hence his 'I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself' (Rom 14.14).

But how could Jesus have made such a declaration, given the Old Testament? The gospel accounts have Jesus appealing to the obvious fact of life that food passes through the body (it does not enter the heart). It may seem a little strained to interpret this as an 'appeal to creation', and yet, given what we have seen already of Jesus' view of the kingdom of God as the restoration of creation, that explanation of Jesus' teaching is not implausible. Certainly later New Testament tradition - in particular I Tim 4.4 - rejects abstinence from certain foods on the grounds that 'everything created by God is good'. And it is at least as plausible to explain Jesus' teaching as a reflection of his positive view of creation, in particular of creation being restored in his ministry, as to explain it in any other way. Again a Mosaic regulation - this time the regulation defining some things as unclean - is seen as a

temporary expedient: everything was created very good, and the coming of the kingdom reaffirms that goodness.

There may be more to it than this. It has been argued by the Old Testament anthropologists that the OT laws about clean and unclean foods were intended to express an understanding of Israel being a holy people, distinct from their pagan (unclean) neighbours. One of the striking characteristics of Jesus' ministry that differentiated his ministry from that of his contemporaries was that he proclaimed an inclusive holiness of love (even towards enemies, Samaritans and others), not an exclusive separation-holiness. This was not, I suggest, because Jesus was a modern liberal thinker who disliked the OT holiness code, but because he believed that a new era of reconciliation had come. God's kingdom is not just for one nation, but for the whole world. The superseding of OT laws of cleanness and uncleanness represents the breaking down of barriers between clean and unclean, as between Jew and Samaritan and Greek.[4]

(v) The Son of man with dominion

Much of what I have said so far is, I hope, not too speculative, though the point about clean and unclean food is less surely based than some of the others. I am, however, on much more precarious ground in arguing that the title, or designation, Son of man that is ascribed to Jesus in the gospels may be relevant to our theme. I cannot go into all the massively complicated debate that surrounds the Son of man theme; for myself I am persuaded that Son of man was a distinctive way that Jesus spoke of himself (not the way that lots of people spoke about themselves). But, assuming that he did use this self-designation, what did he mean by it? (Or, if he didn't, what did the evangelists mean by it?)

The expression 'the Son of man' in itself means nothing more or less than 'the human being'. At least I say nothing more or less, but, of course, 'Son of man' is a specifically male term, and so inclusive language may let us down at this point! But why does Jesus refer to himself as 'the human being'? Hardly because he wished to assert his humanity as opposed to his divinity; that was not a problem in the context of his ministry. But the Hebrew phrase for Son of man (for example in the book of Ezekiel and in Ps 8.5) is, of course, *ben adam*. And the question that suggests itself to those of us interested in questions of creation must be whether there is any Adam-allusion in Jesus' usage.

Against this it may be plausibly argued that an allusion to Daniel 7 and the 'one like a son of man' is more probably intended by Jesus and certainly by the

evangelists, since there are unmistakeable echoes of the Danielic vision in Jesus' sayings about his future coming, e.g. Mark 13.26, 14.62. It makes a great deal of sense to interpret Jesus' Son of man language against the background of Daniel with its promise of the divine kingdom (note the expression) and of the vindication of God's people. The one like a son of man in Daniel 7 represents the 'saints of the most high', and it makes good sense to see in Jesus' use of the expression an implied, though deliberately ambiguous, claim to be the one in whom the salvation of God's people has come into the present.

This Danielic interpretation of Jesus' Son of man language is in my view the single most plausible interpretation on offer. However, it seems possible at least that the term may have more than one resonance and more than one Old Testament background. Statistically the expression 'son of man' occurs more in the book of Ezekiel than anywhere else in the Old Testament, and in some ways the usage there - not 'one like a son of man', but 'son of man' used as a way of addressing the prophet - is closer to the gospels than that in Daniel. It has been argued in a recent thesis that this may be a significant background to the gospel usage with Jesus being a new and greater prophet.[5]

But another significant Old Testament 'son of man' is in Psalm 8, where the well-known words are found: 'What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you visit him? Yet you have made him little less than God, and you crown him with glory and honour. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea...' (vv. 4-8). This Psalm, picking up as it does the themes of Genesis 1 and 2 where Adam is given dominion over the world, is, of course, used in the New Testament of Jesus, both in Heb 1.6-9 and in I Cor 15.27. Jesus is seen in the New Testament tradition as the eschatological man who finally fulfils the creation mandate given to humanity.

Whether this idea - and this Old Testament background - formed part of Jesus' understanding of the expression 'Son of man' is impossible to prove. But, given (a) Jesus' understanding of his mission as eschatological fulfilment, (b) the close verbal parallel between 'the Son of man' in Psalm 8 and Jesus' own usage (contrast 'one like a son of man' in Daniel 7 and the vocative 'son of man' form of address in Ezekiel), (c) the association of Son of man language in some sayings of Jesus with the notion of authority, even of authority in relation to that creation ordinance the sabbath (Mark 2.28, cf 2.10), (d) the Christological use of Psalm 8 in very early Christian tradition (i.e. I Corinthians and Hebrews), there is at least a good case for

seeing Psalm 8 as relevant to Jesus' own usage and/or to the evangelists' understanding of 'Son of man'.

This is not to diminish the importance of the Daniel 7 background. Indeed if the Danielic 'one like a son of man' is associated - or was associated in Jewish tradition - with the idea of the 'primal man', then the link to Adam and thence to Psalm 8 is not difficult to make. The Danielic son of man figure is, of course, also given authority under the whole heaven, and it may be that we have a significant complex of related ideas - with Adam, Israel, and 'son of man' belonging together - and all contributing to the New Testament Christological understanding.

Should there be anything in this argument, then it would very significantly reinforce the case for seeing Jesus' mission (and hence the church's mission) as one with relevance to creation. The divine mandate to humanity to act as his vice-regent in his created world is being fulfilled in Jesus and should be fulfilled in his church.

(vi) A Messianic mission to creation?

A significant 'son of man' text which we have not discussed is Psalm 80.17, where the 'son of man' language may have messianic overtones: 'Let thy hand be upon the man of thy right hand, the son of man whom thou hast made strong for thyself'. This verse and others may indicate that the complex of ideas associated with the 'son of man' is even bigger than we have suggested. S. Kim links 'son of man' language with the idea of the divine Messiah and with the suffering servant motif in his *The 'Son of Man' as the Son of God*, and R. Rowe in his article 'Is Daniel's "Son of Man" messianic?' links Psalm 8, Psalm 80 and Daniel 7, and argues that the king/Messiah fulfils the intended role of humanity and is the 'one like a son of man' of Daniel.[6]

Whether or not this linkage is sustainable, the idea of the Messiah having a role in the restoration of creation is one that deserves consideration. James Brady in an article 'The role of miracle-working as authentication of Jesus as "the Son of God"' notes the late Jewish tradition, attested for example by Josephus, *Ant 8.45*, associating Solomon with the exorcism of demons, and argues that this Solomonic tradition is significant background to the gospels' portrayal of Jesus as the miracle-working Son of David/Messiah/Son of God.[7] Brady quotes from B. Nolan to the effect that the oriental concept of kingship included the idea of the king as 'mediator of the cosmic order' and guarantor of 'righteousness', and claims that the kingdom as announced and brought by Jesus 'is a cataclysmic restructuring of the fallen created order'. Jesus was the king of 'peace' in a way that even Solomon wasn't: he 'showed

himself to be God's anointed, God's representative and God's Son in His conquering the forces of evil which had prevailed over the cosmos' (p.37).

This explanation, even if speculative, is suggestive, and, especially if it is combined with the previous ideas about 'Son of man', offers an attractively coherent explanation of various different christological strands in the gospels.

(vii) Respect for nature

The injunction in Genesis to Adam and Eve to subdue the earth and have dominion over its creatures could be used - and probably has been used - to justify indiscriminate human exploitation of nature, which we today recognize to have been destructive. Such a use of the text cannot be justified from the Old Testament, where God's creation is described as very good (and so not to be abused), where God's care of his creatures - and not just of human creation - is movingly described, and where there is a beautiful vision of all God's creation joining in worship of the creator (e.g. Pss 145, 148, etc.) Human rule in God's world, though theologically right, should operate within these parameters.

So far as the teaching of Jesus is concerned, there is no direct instruction on the care of the created world, which is hardly surprising given the ancient social context where exploitation of nature and animals was nothing like the problem that it is in our technologically powerful and manipulative age. However, the Old Testament vision of the Creator's care of his creatures is reflected in Jesus' teaching, notably in Matt 6.26-30, where Jesus speaks of God feeding the birds and clothing the lilies in all their magnificence; not only does this passage, along with many of his other parables, testify to Jesus' closeness to and appreciation of the natural world; but it may also be seen as putting humanity alongside other creatures in 'the community of creation', since Jesus compares the situation of the disciples under God to that of other creatures. Although he speaks of the greater value to God of his human creatures, Jesus invites his followers to recover the sense of creaturely trust and dependence that is characteristic of the non-human creation. It is not far-fetched to say that the vision of the creation-community living together in dependence on the creator is part of Jesus' vision of the kingdom of God. It is just possible that Jesus' being 'with the wild animals' in Mark 1.13 is intended to be seen by Mark as a fulfilment by Jesus himself of that vision; but, if that is a relatively speculative idea, the case for seeing the kingdom of God as God's rule being restored not just in human hearts but in the whole created world is not.[8]

(viii) Jesus: a concluding comment on incarnation and resurrection

We should not leave the section of our paper considering Jesus without at least mentioning the ideas of incarnation and resurrection, since these - at least at the level of the evangelists, in particular John - are arguably more relevant and theologically important for our kingdom/creation theme than anything else. That God takes the created world seriously is established decisively for Christian theology by the fact that God revealed himself and his love through the human being Jesus - 'the word became flesh', as John puts it. That God intends to restore creation is established by his raising of Jesus' body from the tomb. There are, of course, all sorts of questions surrounding the ideas of incarnation and resurrection so far as the quest for the historical Jesus is concerned, which we cannot go into here; what we may say fairly safely is that these great Christian doctrines arise *out of* the Jesus-event, and that Jesus is theologically and historically foundational in the Christian view of creation.

Notes

1. To write under the title 'Kingdom and creation: from Jesus to Paul' is a dangerous undertaking. It is to enter several scholarly mine-fields, and there is a grave risk, on the one hand, of superficiality - given the size of the subject - and of being academically blown up, on the other hand, through the mishandling or inadequate handling of some of the issues involved. However, the risk will be worth taking if the effect of the paper is to stimulate thought on the question of the New Testament and ecology, since, as far as I know, the subject is not one that has often been addressed.

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2. It is, however, to say that any approach to ecological, social or political problems that underestimates the far-reaching - even cosmic - dimensions of evil is questionable. In Pauline terminology, we 'wrestle not against flesh and blood' - not only we might say - 'but against the principalities and powers in the heavenly places' (Eph 6.12). This means that suggested solutions to our planetary crises that rely on education or on political or economic change and that leave out the spiritual and the need for the renewal of the human heart are fatally flawed. (Note Jesus' emphasis on the human heart as the source of evil in Mark 7.15-23.)

3. See my 'Paul's Use of the Jesus Tradition: Three Samples', *Gospel Perspectives V*, ed. D. Wenham, Sheffield, JSOT, 1984, pp. 7-37.

4. I am grateful to the Rev. T. Williams for reminding me of the importance of the cleanness/uncleanness issue. On Jesus' inclusive holiness see M. Borg, *Conflict Holiness and Politics in the teaching of Jesus*, New York, Edwin Mellen Press, 1984. On the OT background see G. J. Wenham's 'Christ's healing ministry and his attitude to the Law' in *Christ the Lord*, ed. H. H. Rowdon, IVP, 1982, pp. 115-126.

5. A PhD thesis for the Council of National Academic Awards submitted through Westminster College, Oxford, in summer 1991 by Ramesh Khatry, entitled 'The Authenticity of the Parable of the Darnel and its Interpretation'.

6. Kim's book is published in Tübingen by Mohr, 1983; Rowe's article in *Christ the Lord*, ed H. H. Rowdon, IVP, 1982, pp. 71-96. On Son of man see also the important C. Caragounis *The Son of Man*, Tübingen, Mohr.

7. *Churchman* 193, 1989, 32-29; I am grateful to Mr. M. Newman for alerting me to this article and its thesis.

8. I am indebted to the recent and as yet unpublished lectures on 'How Green are the Gospels' by Dr. Richard Bauckham for drawing my attention to J. Moltmann's phrase 'community of creation' in connection with Matthew 6 and for the suggestion about Mark 1.13, though that suggestion has also been made by others - see Brady's references, art cit. 39. Dr. Bauckham stressed that the kingdom has to do with the renewal of creation.

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Letters